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## Student-run welding workshop gives women and LGBTQIA+ individuals a maker space of their own

Born out of frustration with a male-dominated industry, The Red Bench is as much about community building as welding.

March 17, 2022 By Donna McKinnon



Jo Borrelli (left) and Mack Johnston co-founded The Red Bench to help women and LGBTQIA+ individuals feel empowered to learn welding skills in an inclusive workshop. “We want our members to feel the way (we) feel when we finish a weld — strong and confident.” (Photo: Supplied)

When Mack (Mackenzi) Johnston withdrew from engineering studies at a previous university, she felt discouraged and uninspired. The obstacles she faced in the male-dominated industry seemed insurmountable at times, and the path to success murky at best. Buoyed by memories of working alongside her father in his garage as a youth, Johnston recalled how strong and capable she felt solving problems with her hands.

Turning her focus to the trades, Johnston took an introductory course at [SAIT](#) in oxyacetylene welding that changed everything. Something about the feel of melting and joining metal filled her with joy. It was the first time in a long time, Johnston recalled, that she felt a sense of pride and self-worth.

“When do you have the chance to channel such power out of your own hands?” she said. “It’s unlike anything else in ordinary life. I was hooked.”

Now studying [materials engineering](#) at the University of Alberta, Johnston, along with fellow student and friend Jolene (Jo) Borrelli, launched [The Red Bench](#) — a member-based, inclusive and fully equipped welding workshop to help women and individuals within the LGBTQIA+ community learn new skills and discover the type of hidden strength that transformed Johnston's life.

"It pushes you out of your comfort zone," said Johnston. "We want our members to feel the way Jo and I feel when we finish a weld — strong and confident."

The Red Bench grew out of a series of popular welding sessions that began in 2019 with female engineering students, including Borrelli, who had approached Johnston about learning basic, hands-on welding skills outside of class. The COVID-19 pandemic ended the sessions, but the two got together over the summer to formulate the next steps.

"I was really sad because we had seen so much growth in ourselves and in other women who had attended the sessions," said Borrelli, who is in her final year of study. "Once Mack and I started talking, we thought, why don't we take it outside the university and into the community? We wanted The Red Bench to be accessible to women from all walks of life."

Johnston and Borrelli developed a vision for The Red Bench over a series of meetings, including a code of ethics and a commitment to creating a safe space where members — regardless of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, marital status, family status, genetic characteristics or disability — can reach their full potential.

Johnston, who identifies as a cis woman and part of the LGBTQIA+ community, is keenly aware of the barriers women like her face in the welding industry.

"To put it frankly, the struggle is real," she said. "The bias that diverse, non-binary or underrepresented gender identities face in the welding industry is real."

Johnston and Borrelli knew the demand for the space would be there, but building a community of support, especially from industry, was a steep climb. Relationships were created from the ground up through "persistent action," explained Johnston, involving "getting out on the streets and talking to people," sending emails, giving presentations and making many phone calls to industry leaders.

[Canwe Solutions Ltd.](#), a Western Canadian welding engineering company, offered a space just off Whyte Avenue for the workshops, meeting their requirement that the shop be safe and accessible. Other firms including [Alco Gas & Oil](#) and [Miller](#) stepped up, providing funding and tools for the workshops.

"The way that individuals, companies and institutions followed up their verbal support of The Red Bench with generous donations of funds, equipment, tools and supplies was incredible," said Johnston. "We went from zero to a fully funded and operational shop in less than six months!"

The Red Bench is now funded through 2022, with [several projects](#) already underway.

As a trade, welding is very much in demand, said Borrelli, adding that women struggle to access those high-paying positions. Members of The Red Bench, who pay a drop-in fee on a sliding scale from five to zero dollars, do not receive certification but are exposed to the possibility of pursuing educational and professional opportunities in welding.

Most importantly, members are given the space to learn, have fun, practise skills and be inspired to do whatever they put their mind to — tools in hand.

"We're not financially benefiting from this project," said Borrelli. "This is our passion project. We care deeply about it, and we just love helping people. We want to empower women, because when women and LGBTQIA+ individuals thrive, communities thrive too. We're here for it."

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